DEACONS AT YOUR SERVICE

by
ALISON WHITE
and
DI WILLIAMS

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CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. History	4
3. Sources of Strength	6
4. Renewal of the Laity	6
5. Renewal of Orders	13
6. Living as Deacons: Some Examples	17
7. Conclusion	24

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1. INTRODUCTION

'But what are you now?' came the perplexed question from a member of the congregation greeting a newly ordained deacon. That question is being asked in different ways all round the church worldwide.

At present the diaconate struggles to find a distinctive character because it is having to be different things to different groups of people. It is a temporary stopping-place for an annual intake of men on the way to priesthood. It is a siding for women who want to test their vocation to priesthood. It is a convenient ticket for varieties of 'full-time ministry'. So far scant attention has been given to those men and women who are actually called to be deacons.

The word deacon comes from a Greek word 'diakonos' meaning servant. It is the word that Jesus used to describe his own service of love to the world. 'The Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk. 10.45). The role of the deacon is to remind God's people of this aspect of Christ's ministry and of our call to live it out. It is the work of the deacon to encourage, organize and enable the diakonia of the Body of Christ. The renewal of the diaconate would not be a confiscation of ministry from the laity, putting it firmly in the hands of yet more clergy. It would be a means of enabling the *whole* church to respond to the urgent cry from the world for effective ministry and caring.

The Anglican Church already has a substantial part of the structure to permit a distinctive diaconate. It upholds a threefold order of ministry, so the office of deacon already exists, it has been less certain over how to make it distinctive. The Lambeth Conference of 1958 recommended that, 'Each Province of the Anglican Communion shall consider whether the office of deacon shall be restored to its primitive place as a distinctive order in the Church, instead of being regarded as a probationary period for the priesthood.'[1] By its meeting in 1968 the Lambeth Conference was firm in stating that the Anglican Communion should now move towards a recovery of the diaconate as a significant and operative order within the ordained ministry.

In 1981, the General Synod passed a motion asking the bishops to consider ways in which the diaconate could be a more vital part of the threefold ministry, with a distinctive selection and training process. Since then the passing of the Deacons (Ordination of Women) Measure 1987 has established the diaconate as permanent. The nature of the order has been clouded by confusion with the issue of the ordination of women. The two issues need to be disentangled if progress is to be made. To this end the bishops have called for a report on the diaconate for General Synod which will be written by the Bishop of Portsmouth, Canon Stephen Platten and Mary Tanner.[2] It will require commitment to move from debate to action.

As we go to press, we learn that this report, *Deacons in the Ministry of the Church*, has been received by the House of Bishops (*Minutes,* 21 October 1987), and commended for publication and for debate in General Synod in February 1988.

This booklet will do no more than brush against some of the myriad major issues for which restoration of the diaconate would have implications. In making our own contribution, we look forward to that of others.

[1] *The Lambeth Conference 1958* (SPCK and Seabury Press 1958) p.2.106.

[2] The Scottish Episcopal Church also has a group working on a report on the distinctive diaconate.

2. HISTORY: WHERE DID THEY SPRING FROM?

The current interest in the diaconate might lead us to think that the church has hit on a new idea. It is much more of a recurring theme in the ministerial history of the church. We are not grappling with an innovation but trying to make an appropriate response in the twentieth century to the potential of the historic role of the deacon. This is not the opportunity to discuss the history of the diaconate,[1] but the briefest of sketches might give us the awareness of a cloud of witnesses to the contemporary debate.

The clues in the New Testament about the organization of the church do not make a case for the existence of a specific order of deacon. Within the ministry of baptized Christians, however, it does seem that certain men and women exercised a special function of service (diakonia) as their particular gift. Paul describes Epaphras as a minister (diakonos) of Christ (Col. 1.7) and Phoebe as diakonos of the Church at Cenchreae (Rom. 16.1-2). She seems to have been given a definite mission to the Church in Rome, and this might suggest that 'diakonos' in this context involved some official status. The scholarly debate over the beginning of ecclesial office has raged over 1 Timothy 3.8-13, Philippians 1.1 and Acts 6.1-5. There does not seem to be a uniform structure operating in either the Pauline or Hellenistic Churches. These examples do, however, give us evidence of the personal and public responsibility for service being exercised by particular Christians in different churches.

By the beginning of the second century, as orders of ministry developed, we find many references to the deacon in the writings of the Church Fathers. Ignatius of Antioch delineates two strands of ministry for the deacon, as servant of the mysteries of Jesus Christ and as minister for the poor.

In the third century, Hippolytus records that, although the functions of the deacon remain the same, the three-fold order of ministry had developed a more hierarchical character. The distinctiveness of the offices became centred not so much on their function as on the honour and power attributed to them in different degrees. This was to affect the survival of the diaconate.

The deacon entered the fourth century as a person of great importance, within both the liturgy and the social ministry of the church. The Syrian 'Didascalia' emphasizes the significance of the diaconate, not least in the fact that it seems to have been full-time and salaried. Nicea (325) established the role of the presbyter as president at the eucharist. By the end of the fourth century, the balance of power had changed: the presbyter had become the first sacramental minister in the local church and the bishop became sacramental primate of the diocese. Men to be admitted to these orders had first to be ordained deacon. The diaconate was to become the first step, where few wished to remain, on the 'clerical ladder'.

[1] See J. M. Barnett, *The Diaconate* (Seabury 1979).

The following centuries saw the progressive decline of the diaconate as a distinctive office in its own right. As it lost its importance it became increasingly restricted to liturgical functions. Subsequently, in the West, even these functions faded out. Attempts to revive the office in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries largely failed to gain an appropriate balance between service in liturgy and in the community. Protestant Churches emphasized the social welfare role, often overlooking the place in the liturgy. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches tended to restrict the deacon to curtailed liturgical functions, with a loss of the fuller ministry of social care.

In our own century there is a move to renew the diaconate as a distinctive ministry. This can be seen worldwide and in many denominations: the Churches are drawing on the resources of their roots to meet the demands of the present.

3. SOURCES OF STRENGTH: TWO IMAGES FOR THE DEACON

There is a real danger of the appeal of the diaconate being seen as a rather romantic one, potent for those who catch on but of little use to the world which is untouched by the Church in action. The images of servant and bridge have been used without the availability of many examples of these being lived out. The images lose their strength if they circumvent the daily frustration and drudgery involved in diaconal ministry. Nevertheless, it seems important to draw on the theology which has prompted and supported this ministry.

The Deacon as Servant

'This is our God the servant king'[1] begins the chorus of a popular modern hymn. It is with Jesus himself that we find the dynamic of the call to servanthood, not just to acts of service. It has perhaps not disturbed the church enough that it is called to follow one who declared that he had come not to be served but to serve. Certainly, this is not the only picture that the Gospels give of Jesus but it occurs frequently, both in the narrative and in the teaching.

Jesus spent most of his time with the outcasts and the poor of Jewish society, much to the discomfort of those who found such associations unacceptable (Mk. 2.16-17). His ministry was often prompted by the obvious needs of those who came for help. This often, but not always, opened up the possibility of kindling or fanning faith. It was a loving and costly ministry, putting him at the disposal of others, and ultimately at their mercy on the cross.

Jesus' teaching by word and deed also incorporates the call to others to serve. He has a stern warning for those who do not respond to those in need (Matt. 25.45). Jesus' servanthood is not just for the immediate relieving or comfort of those he served but is to engage them in service. It is here that we perceive the dynamic for the diaconate. Deacons have no monopoly of servanthood: it is a characteristic of all Christian ministry. Part of the deacon's role is to embody the figure of the servant as a reminder to the faithful of the pattern of Christ for their lives,

> 'Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.' (Phil. 2.6-7).

It is a supreme example of the ways of God overturning the expectations of the world. The kenosis, or self-emptying of God, has continued to fascinate and perturb people down through the centuries. The power of God is not used to dominate or dictate to his creation, but as power for service. The deacon's active servanthood is particularly evident in enabling the service that members of the Christian community offer to one another and to the world.

The Deacon as Bridge

This image arises from the early history of deacons as they began to find an established place in the liturgy and ministry of the church.

[1] Graham Kendrick (Thank you Music, Copyright c. 1984).

As the people gathered for prayer and to celebrate the eucharist, the 'Didascalia' gives us this picture of the deacons:

> 'As for the deacons, let one always stand by the offerings of the eucharist; and let another stand outside the door and observe those who enter.'[1]

The deacon had a place both inside and outside the church. There were particular liturgical functions to be carried out; the collecting of the offerings, reading the gospel, organizing and leading intercessions, guiding the congregation through the service, administering the chalice, performing the ablutions, giving the dismissal. These liturgical duties, along with overseeing the behaviour of the worshippers, were performed by those whose specific calling was to care for those in need in the community.

> It is required of you deacons that you visit all who are in need.'[2]

or, as the Ordinal in the ASB has it, the deacon should work with the members of the Church,

> 'in caring for the poor, the needy, the sick, and all who are in trouble.'[3]

The work of the deacon began to reach beyond the Christian community and with it into the much wider arena of secular need. This should not come as a surprise to a church commanded by its Lord to love both God and its neighbours. John Tiller writes:

> 'Deacons are ordained as a focus of diaconal ministry, which is the call of God to serve the world in Christ's name. Perhaps the most essential vision, therefore, is to see the deacon as a community servant. Diaconal ministry should not be so tied conceptually to the parochial context as is true generally of the presbyterate.'[4]

The deacon, however, is not sent out from the Church and the door closed firmly behind him.

> 'the deacon as community servant needs to be operating firmly within the context of the witness of the whole church, and one Christian community in particular.'[5]

In both practical and symbolic ways the church is represented to the world and the world to the church in the person and work of the deacon. This is not to undermine the role of the laity in all this; suffice to say, at this point, that the function of a bridge is primarily to provide a way by which others may travel.

[1] p.144 (S. Brock and M. Vasey, Grove Liturgical Study 29, p.16).
[2] *ibid.*, p.176 (Grove, p.23).
[3] ASB 1980, p.344.
[4] *A Strategy for the Church's Ministry* (C.I.O. 1983) para. 186, p.112.
[5] *Ibid.*, para. 186 p.113.

4. RENEWAL OF THE LAITY

In many parts of the church over the last thirty years or so there has been both discussion and activity to understand and establish the role of the laity as the People of God. 'Because all human beings are made in the image of God, they are called to become the People of God, the church, servants and ministers and citizens of the Kingdom, a new humanity in Jesus Christ.'[1] It is a calling given authority through baptism, and one which is caried out principally in the world rather than in Church buildings. John Tiller says that in his own thinking:

> '"Shared ministry" has been interpreted, not as a way of rallying to the aid of the clergy, but as a response to the calling of all who are baptized into Christ to act as his Body in the world.'[2]

Often the acceptable hall-mark of the committed Christian is to undertake an area of service which is within the ambit of the church, such as leading study groups, teaching Sunday School, being church warden and so forth. Rare is the church that would encourage Christians to see their main area of service in the secular community. Leonardo Boff reflects on the Vatican II document 'Lumen Gentium':

> 'We must first recognize that the activity of the laity is not an extension of the hierarchy. Lay people have their own place in the Church and they must act within this sphere. The lay person is not a secular person. He or she is a member of the Church in the secular world and has a direct mandate from Jesus Christ.'[3]

Lay Christians may want help to develop specific gifts. Some dioceses have developed local lay leadership training programmes in response to this need.[4] Their objectives are to enable existing or potential lay leaders to develop their leadership skills and the experience they already have in lay ministries in church and community, and preferably both.[5]

The renewal of the diaconate is not an attempt to muscle in on the proper ministry of the laity and take it over. The deacon's role is not so much to do the serving as to work alongside God's people and encourage and facilitate their implementing 'the mandate from Jesus Christ' to be servants.

There will sometimes be exceptions. In some cases, particularly those of chaplaincy in hospitals and prisons for example, the deacon might be the person employed by the institution and circumstances might limit the involvement of the laity in the daily work. The deacon would ideally be part of a local church and therefore able to draw on the resources of God's people, both in prayer and in active sharing of the church's responsibility for ministry. It might indeed be seen as a vital part of the deacon's calling to build bridges between specialized institutions and the wider community.

[1] *All are Called* (C.I.O. 1985) p.3.
[2] *op. cit.* para. 140 p.81.
[3] *Church: Charism and Power* (S.C.M. 1985) p.30.
[4] E.g. the 'Step by Step' scheme in the Stepney area of London diocese. In Liverpool diocese there is the 'Group for Urban Ministry and Leadership' programme.
[5] *Faith in the City* (Church House Publishing 1985) para. 6.14 p.109.

The renewal of the diaconate will mean a redistribution of liturgical function, so that the ministry of service may take its place in the worship of the church. This is a potential area of threat to the laity because it might be seen to encroach on the hard-won territory of lay participation in the conducting of worship. The experience of the Episcopal Church of the USA and the Anglican Church of Canada would bear this out. ECUSA's questions concerning the diaconate have centred around the liturgical role. It is feared that deacons might monopolize the opportunities for lay involvement which, although as yet they do not fully have, they are working towards. It is an indictment of clerical power that the renewal of orders should be felt as a threat to the renewal of the laity. In many Canadian dioceses there has been a moratorium on developing the diaconate for the same reasons that trouble ECUSA.

Renewal of the role of the laity in liturgy would be part of the responsibility of both deacon and priest. The ordained need not be perceived as owners of the worship but as participants with particular roles. One of those roles is the calling out of gifts, equipping, teaching and enabling the laity to take part in public worship.

—The Dynamic of Mission

The overwhelming call for God's people is to demonstrate his character and this will mean being caught up in the activity of God in the world. God is himself the one who sends. The history of his dealings with his people is full of men and women sent with messages, warnings and gifts. They are often met with hostility. This reaches its climax in the sending of God's only Son (1 Jn. 4.9). And it continues in the sending of the Spirit to enable the people of God to live the life of faith to the full. This will mean we ourselves become those who are sent (Jn. 20.21).

But what are God's people sent as and to whom? Difficulty in grappling with these questions has often led to conflict or apathy both within congregations and in the wider inter-church debate on mission. The church has come to this debate with the Great Commission in one hand and the Great Commandment in the other as guides to general direction. Neither of these summaries is designed to clarify how they might be fulfilled.

Models of mission have been multiplied over the years. The present renewal of the church in its understanding of itself as servant may give a new dynamic to commitment to mission. The diaconate has a role to play in this, in holding the call to servanthood before fellow believers.

When the church has heard the call to be servants of God, then it receives its commission to serve not only those in the 'household of faith', but also those in the world. If Christ is acclaimed as head, not only of the church but of the cosmos (Col. 1.15-20), then he is also the connection between the two spheres. But Christians have long struggled with how to relate the two, swinging from submersion in the world to withdrawal from it, to uneasy compromise. A boundary does exist[1] and it is important in the church's understanding of itself as a distinct community. The figure of the deacon, especially in the facilitating role as bridge, reminds the people of God of their call to cross that boundary in both directions. David Bosch calls mission:

'The Church-crossing-frontiers-in-the-form-of-servant.'[2]

[1] See 1 Cor. 6 for example.

[2] David Bosch *Witness to the World* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980) p.248.

Good News is not a disembodied message but is incarnated in the person of the messenger. Philip Potter talks of 'credible persons to say the words.'

The supreme example of this is Jesus himself. In his person and ministry is the living example of the diakonia of mission. The question for to-day is does the wold see that reflected in the life and work of the church? The church needs to recognize afresh the potency and potential of the call to embody the Good News, to live it out. The deacon is historically the one who has embodied to the church *its* call to be sent to serve.

The church has often relied on programmes or agencies of missionary activity, evangelism or service. These have sometimes had the negative effect of separating mission from the daily life of the church. This has meant that many Christians have escaped the radical challenge of being God's servants in the world. It is vital for the health of God's people that they do not allow deacons to become another separate agency to relieve the church of its guilt or uncertainty about mission.

If the church's call to be servants has as its model Christ himself, then it should be no surprise to find mission centring on those for whom he had a particular interest: the poor, the marginalized, those in need. This priority in mission draws deeply for its dynamic on the theology of the cross, symbol of God's total self-giving for those without help.

> 'A Church under the cross cannot present itself other than in the form of a servant. It will always have to remember that its Lord and Master was, at all times and in all circumstances, concerned about the poor, the miserable and the sick.'[1]

The situation in South Africa, for example, has prompted many initiatives from the church. Among them are a programme to train deacons in the Johannesburg diocese and the Report of the Provincial Commission on the Diaconate (1981). The diaconate is seen as one part of the renewal of the whole church and 'not as a temporary expedient to cope with the particular needs of the present.'[2]

There is a recognition of the pressing call from the oppressed.

> 'The fact that apartheid society creates so many areas of social need raises the question of reforming the diaconate so as to restore it to its original function of ministry to the suffering and needy.'[3]

In Britain the *Faith in the City* Report has attempted to jolt both Church and nation into action in and for the Urban Priority Areas with their 'three essential characteristics of economic decline, physical decay and social disintegration.'[4]

[1] R. von Thadden Missions Under the Cross (ed. N. Goodall) (Edinburgh House Press 1953) p.53.
[2] Report of the Provincial Commission on the Diaconate p.D4.
[3] *ibid.*, p.D1.
[4] *op. cit.*, para. 1.47 p.24.

The report emphasizes that, while debate is important, action is vital. One possible line of response is the deployment of deacons in UPAs. This would demand commitment on the Church of England's part in terms of training and stipends. Many UPA parishes have relied on workers such as social workers and youth workers who can be supported through urban grants.

One of the aims of the ordained being to work alongside not instead of people, the deacon might be instrumental in restoring responsibility and power to the Church in the city for its mission. The Commission's caveat to the Church Army would apply equally to deacons:

> 'They should, however, continually assess whether they are contributing to the development of ministry *by* local people rather than exercising ministry and leadership instead of them.'[1]

The church has constantly to work out its relationship to the world. The Western Church struggles to come to terms with its loss of power in social structures. The time for mission from a supposed position of benevolent superiority is past. Renewal of the corporate diaconate in which the order of deacons plays an important part, could bring us into a new dimension of our missionary nature as 'the Church for others.'

—Lay Accredited Ministries

One of the strengths of diaconal ministry is that every baptized Christian is called to exercise it. We are in this together! But this can also lead to the concept of this ministry becoming so generalized that it loses its character and direction.

The renewed diaconate needs to resist the temptation to become an all-purpose accreditation for anyone exercising a particular ministry in the church. This would not only blur the distinctiveness of the diaconate but also vitiate the individual characteristics of different types of accredited ministry. Tiller seems unclear on this in his chapter on deacons. On the one hand he calls for the diaconate to make a distinctive contribution of its own, particularly as 'community servant', and on the other he writes:

> '. . . it does not monopolize any ministerial function. It would be natural to expect that most existing licensed ministers, other than priests, would want to be admitted to such a revived diaconate (e.g., deaconesses, lay workers, Church Army officers, social workers.)'[2]

This assumes that these people have a calling to the diaconate rather than to the priesthood or to be laity. Since the Report was published in 1983, a permanent diaconate has been created in the Church of England, and parish workers and deaconesses have been offered the opportunity to be admitted to the order. But to *what* are they admitted? The emphasis has been on ordination, not on the distinctive nature and function of the diaconate.

a. Readers

Readers, like many others in ministry, appear to be in a period of re-assessment of their role. Canon Timothy Tyndall writing in *The Reader*

[1] *op. cit.* para. 5.52 p.95.
[2] *op. cit.*, para. 184, p.111.

speaks of the 'Reader-shaped hole'. The role he envisages seems to be for Readers working within the internal life of the church, with the principal task of communication of knowledge: 'Readers are the "builders-up" of the Church.'

Tiller sees the Reader becoming part of the local ministry teams he envisages. He recognizes that some might want to seek local ordination. For others he sees another possibility:

> 'Some Readers might see their ministry as something much wider than leadership in one particular local Church. If this calling has substance, they ought to be selected and trained for the Order of Deacon and serve as something akin to public preachers.'[1]

This accords with Tiller's understanding that as soon as a ministry crosses the local boundary, then the person should be ordained:

> 'The line adopted in this strategy is that where a lay ministry serves the whole diocese (e.g., stewardship adviser) it should be considered for inclusion in the diaconate; all local lay ministries should be recognised locally and require no further authorization,'[1]

This seems to use ordination to the diaconate as a blanket form of accreditation only for ministry beyond the local area of the minister. It does little to enhance the integrity of lay ministry. It does not promote an assessment of whether the diaconate does have a distinctive role. It also does not take into account the deacon's particular role in the secular community, and as a servant, with the church, of those in need.

b. Pastoral Assistants

There is an increasing number of people serving short or long term in this capacity. The impression is that some are working as 'general dog's body' and others have a more specified role in pastoral care, oversight of youth work and a myriad of other permutations.

Some features of this kind of work differentiate it from the ordained diaconate. Firstly, it is the work of the individual concerned and does not necessarily include the demand to equip the rest of the congregation and facilitate their ministry. Secondly, it may only last for a particular length of time, in some cases as little as a year. The person may then go on to some entirely different employment. This is in contrast to the deacon whose calling and commitment to the ministry is lifelong. Thirdly, the pastoral assistant is accountable only to the local church; maybe, in practice, only the incumbent. The deacon, however, is accountable, in a more direct sense to the universal church. This is reflected in methods of selection, training and, where applicable, payment; and in the promises made at ordination. Whereas pastoral assistant and deacon are not the same rose by two names, they are not mutually exclusive in a church community.

c. Church Army

Much of the work of the Church Army appears to be very akin to that of the diaconate. It engages principally in 'sent-out' ministries of evangelism and social care. Perhaps the main difference, apart from the obvious one of ordination, is that the Church Army is mainly accountable only within its own system. But should its officers be ordained?

Using the diaconate simply to tidy up or standardize accredited ministries would be an impoverishment of the potential of different styles of ministry. It would also confuse the character of the diaconate.

[1] *op. cit.*, para. 229, p.130.
[2] *op. cit.* para. 231, p.131.

5. RENEWAL OF ORDERS

The question of ordination is a vexed one in the church, both in the varied theologies and in the diversity of perception and practice by ordained and laity alike. To suggest a renewal of orders is a perilous course. The danger, of course, is that the fear of drowning prevents anyone from swimming.

There is another fear lurking in the penumbra surrounding not only the diaconate but all orders. It is the fear that power within the church has been too firmly in the hands of the ordained; the ministry of the church has too easily become synonymous with the ordained ministry, which has most visibly been the priesthood. Ordination has often conferred inappropriate status within the Body of Christ. There is, therefore, in some quarters, an understandable reluctance to encourage another brand of clergy. Ministry belonging to the people of God has often become the domain of the minister, who may have unwillingly adopted the role of the ubiquitous and omnicompetent factotum, often to the relief of the congregation. These distortions need not lead us to despair.

Orders are a helpful and, we believe, God-given gift to the church; part of its understanding of itself and the outworking of its life:

> 'Orders exist to be a representative focus of the Church's authority to minister the Gospel in Christ's name. The ordained ministry is therefore composed of members of the laity who are authorised to represent the whole Church, both in their public ministry and in their representative functions with the Christian community.'[1]

Beyond being a 'representative focus,' ordination brings with it the call to enable and encourage the diaconal and priestly wok of the people of God, its mission and its ministry.

What then are some of the issues raised by the prospect of a renewed diaconate?

a. A full and equal order?

Advertising a programme on the ordination of women, *The Guardian* wrote: 'Earlier this year, nine women were made deacons—the *lowest order* of the Anglican clergy—but women are still not allowed to become full priests.'[2]

This amply illustrates the problem of hierarchy in the church. The renewal of the diaconate would need to challenge the notion of there being a lowest order, and the prevalent feeling that authentic ministry is to be a 'full priest'.

The diaconate has suffered from the move in the church from ministry generated from gifts to being a matter of status. This has eroded the

[1] John Tiller *op. cit.* para. 151, p.84.
[2] 19 August 1987 (our italics).

distinctive character of all three orders. The diaconate has become a probationary year before becoming a priest: it has not been on offer as an equally valid and different calling. Its renewal might herald a move towards a richer concept of ministry because it would necessitate some assessment of the charism and focus of ministry of those offering for ordination. It might also make at least a dent in the image of the president of the Christian community 'having' all the ministry.

This would be a difficult issue to tackle because it would mean changes in the structuring of the ecclesiastical institution. The problem lies in the power conferred through the benefice system, with the incumbent having tenure of the freehold. Hitherto deacons have generally been first year curates. It is a problem to break the image of the deacon being an assistant to the priest.

The establishment of an equal order would mean tackling the practical issues currently embodied in smaller stipends, secondary housing, and no security of tenure in the job, unless the deacon is in sector ministry. Establishment figures would need review because deacons would not be classed as assistant staff which, at present, has implications for their deployment.

b. Deacons, Priests and Bishops?

The hope has already been implied that renewal of the diaconate might relieve the priest of having to encourage or perform ministry in all spheres. The overloading of men with inevitably limited energy has led, in many situations, to the neglect of the ministry in the community. The priest has concentrated his resources on his primary responsibility which is the building up of the Christian congregation. His focus of ministry is with the gathered church. In this context he maintains and encourages the worship, especially the sacraments, the preaching and teaching. He fosters the faith and fellowship of the believers.

The focus of ministry for the deacon, as we have seen, is with the gathered Church dispersed in its work of mission and service. This is often a difficult role because of its ambiguity. The deacon is neither a social worker nor the president of the Christian community. The diaconate is certainly not there to cover a shortage of priests nor to take on a pseudo-priestly role. It would help clarification of different callings if ordination was to one order, either deacon or priest, and that any probationary period be served either during training or within that order.

The differentiation of roles and functions between priests and deacons is not to set up 'no trespassing' notices. It is hoped that a sense of distinctive calling will help to release the ministry both of ordained and lay people. A primary focus of ministry is not the same as the entire ministry of the person concerned. It would be unhelpfully limiting to insist on a rigid demarcation.

There would be a close link between bishops and deacons; this goes back to the early church practice. The bishop has a huge job description. Tiller suggests that it comprises 'pastoral oversight', providing a

'focus of unity' and commending the apostolic faith. Episcopal provision of ministry in the diocese will principally be through the other orders. Tiller envisages diocesan teams of deacons directed by the bishop, offering external resources for the ministry of the local church. In any case, whether the diaconate is diocesan or parish based, it would relate to the bishop and to the local church in its own right and not through the presbyterate.

c. A local or universal order?

This question is by no means associated only with the diaconate. Ordination has generally been seen as an inherent part of the 'catholic universality' of the church. This same church is engaged in trying to decide what it means and hopes for if it moves towards local ordination.[1]

> 'We are also well aware of the central significance of the clergy, who are seen as representatives of the official Church. So many people still associate (and even equate) the Church with the ordained ministry. To convert that Church to the importance of recognizing the leadership and gifts of some local people by ordination could, therefore, be regarded as an important sign of the Church's commitment to promoting a truly local Church at the heart of the wider Church.'[2]

Tiller says of the priesthood, but we might include the diaconate:

> 'It is not proposed that the one universal priesthood should be divided into two, but that its members should be more clearly appointed to either a local or to a wider ministry.'[3]

It has already been suggested that ordination should not just become an all-purpose accreditation for ministries which may be diaconal in concern or approach. There would have to be room from non-ordained ministry, and this might be purely local and functional. The ordained deacon has a particular place and role in the life of the local *and* universal church, in its liturgy, ministry and being.

d. An order for women and men?

The ordination of women is another issue too big to deal with in this booklet. Suffice to say that there will be no renewal of the diaconate while it is caught up in the gamut of questions surrounding women in the church. it can only be distinctive as an order when it is not used as an expedient for dealing with women no matter what their vocation. It must also be more than notionally open to men. This will require the co-operation and understanding of all involved in fostering and assessing vocations.

Vocation is not based on gender. The stereotypical view of women as carers and helpers has led to the false assumption that, therefore, they are more suited to the diaconate. This is an inadequate understanding of the diaconate and of gender roles. Both women and men need the freedom to discover a call to a form of ministry, not to have it either thrust on them or effectively denied to them.

[1] a. Tiller p.101f., p.121f. etc.
b. See also *Faith in the City* p.112f. Note that the L.N.S.M. is assumed to be a priest and yet the description of ministry is more that of a deacon in the style and areas of work (paras. 6.25-6.55).

[2] *Faith in the City* para 6.31, p.112.

[3] *op. cit.* para. 168, p.102.

Deacons in Other Parts of the Church

The diaconate is alive and in varying states of health in many of the Churches. It is not possible to attempt to give detail here, but a glance around will indicate that the questions are coming to the surface in different places. The hope expressed in the Lima Document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,* is that this may offer a point of unity: 'The threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve to-day as an expression of the unity we seek and also a means for achieving it.'[1]

The statement on deacons is couched in general terms to include many possibilities from the different denominations.

In the Roman Catholic Church, renewal of the diaconate has been left to the bishops around the world. This has led inevitably to a piecemeal development, with differing degrees of success. Generally, the deacon is seen as an assistant to the priest. The order has had to deal with questions relating to the appropriateness of marriage for the ordained and seems to serve as an expedient in this area at the moment.

In the Orthodox Church, the deacon has largely retained a purely liturgical function in which he has a significant symbolic role. He acts as a bridge between priest and people, the 'angel' or messenger enabling the faithful to participate more fully. The Orthodox do not have the same need as other Churches to revive the diaconate because it has always been preserved within the liturgy.

Generally, deacons of today's Reformed Churches are lay ministers and have little if any liturgical function. The emphasis is on the deacon's role in social ministry. The first English Baptists set apart deacons by the laying on of hands, for ministry to the poor and weak. Deacons nowadays are more involved with the business affairs of the congregation. Some American Baptists are attempting to restore a broader pastoral and charitable dimension to the diaconate.[2] The Lutheran Church saw a revival of lay diaconal associations in the late nineteenth century and now men and women are ordained as deacons. Training will include, with the theological components, a professional qualification such as social worker or nurse.[3]

At their Conference in 1986, the Methodist Church proposed the creation of a new order 'The Methodist Order for Mission and Ministry' (MOMM). This was with the aim of offering an alternative to the understanding of ministers being presidents of their Churches. A lay order 'The Wesley Deaconess Order' had existed until the 1970s when women were just ordained as ministers. This order seems to have been community-centred with many deaconesses working from central mission halls in cities. The new MOMM would include the present Wesley Deaconesses, and probably Church members in paid evangelistic or pastoral service of the Church, and unpaid voluntary workers. The problem here may be to create a distinctive character for MOMM, as it seems to offer more of an all-purpose accreditation.

[1] (WCC, 1982), para. 22, p.24.
[2] J. M. Barnett *op. cit.* p.155.
[3] Sr. Teresa *Distinctive Diaconate Studies 23*, p.156.

6. LIVING AS DEACONS: SOME EXAMPLES[1]

It is not easy to go deacon-watching in the church at present, simply because there are not many as yet who understand their calling to the ministry distinctively as deacons. There are moves being made at the moment, through various associations, to bring together those men and women who are trying to work out the diaconate in practice and theology.[2] The pooling of wisdom and experience is vital in understanding how their ministry might best be used.

There is a wide range of possibilities for diaconal ministry according to the gifts of the person and the needs of the situation. Some deacons may find themselves enabling the laity through adult education programmes; some may work in the community alongside other professionals; some may work in administration; some will be in industry; others will be in prisons. Many will be attached to a particular church congregation but some will be employed by a diocese or deanery.

It is inevitable that some false starts will be made as the Church explores the potential of the diaconate and opens itself to new patterns and styles of ministry.

This chapter offers some descriptions of various deacons from the Churches in Britain, America and Canada. They are representative of deacons working as far apart as Melbourne, Kenya and Hawaii.

Deacons Abroad[3]

1. Maylanne Whittall was ordained deacon in the Anglican Church of Canada in May 1976. Over the next few years her growing desire to work at the full meaning of diaconal ministry and office led her to engage in ministry alongisde those who are poor and without power in society.

In 1982 she began work in South Parkdale, a particularly needy area in the South West tip of Toronto. She initiated and co-ordinated a local ecumenical organization, Parkdale Community Ministy Committee (P.C.M.C.), composed of clergy and lay Christians. The main thrust of P.C.M.C.'s ministry lies in enabling church people to support and strengthen existing services within the neighbourhood and also to initiate new community services where none were offered.

Much of Maylanne's own time in the early stages of this work was channelled into researching and producing a comprehensive report on the needs and resources of South Parkdale. From the observations which conclude that report, P.C.M.C. was able to begin actively directing support and expertise where it was most needed. For example, with the large percentage of ex-psychiatric patients in the neighbourhood, initiatives between the local psychiatric support groups and P.C.M.C. have tried to help congregations in integrating ex-patients into their community. Developments such as this have been significant bridge-building moves between church and community.

[1] The choice of examples is based largely on those with whome we have contact.
[2] e.g., 'Distinctive Diaconate' publications; International Diakonia.
[3] Accounts of ministries of Arlinda Cosby and Connie Hartquist by courtesy of Brother Victor S.S.F.

In the summer of 1985, two projects were under way. P.C.M.C. initiated a period of research into the chaplaincy needs of local nursing and retirement homes. Most of the recommendations of that research were taken up by local church leaders and congregations. Now there is an appropriate, co-ordinated chaplaincy ministry by the local Churches to the homes.

'Church and Community—Partners for Employment', a federally funded project to create jobs in Parkdale and promote community economic development, was also begun in the summer of 1985. Through the initiative of P.C.M.C., working particularly with one of the local Churches and an ex-psychiatric support group, this project was set up to create jobs in an area where over 12% were unemployed. As well as creating stable jobs, this project offers more local control over the economy such that control of community-owned business is in the hands of the people whom it is meant to benefit.

Sadly, in the last year, Maylanne has left her work as co-ordinator of P.C.M.C. In the Anglican Church of Canada at present, financial restraints have prompted the choice not to offer non-presbyteral stipends. Not only was Maylanne under continual pressure to raise funds for P.C.M.C.'s project work, but her own salary, paid by the local Churches, was entirely dependent on their monthly financial state. Some months the Churches could not afford to pay her.

Maylanne's ministry as a deacon is now worked out through her full-time position with an organization concerned wih housing the more disadvantaged in Canadian society. She still acts as deacon in the worshipping life of a local Toronto parish.

2. Clara and Bruce Gilles are both non-stipendiary deacons in the Buffalo diocese of ECUSA. They are committed to an understanding of diaconal ministry which has a preferential option for the poor and disadvantaged of society at its heart. Both, too, see their ministry as in some way linking the church and the wider community.

For Bruce the characteristics of distinctive diaconal ministry are expressed in his spare-time chaplaincy work to the local children's hospital.

For Clara, a personnel manager in Buffalo's hospital, her ordination as deacon in 1983 has found particular expression in a diocesan-wide ministry of preaching and the education of Christians towards involvement in community and social care progorammes. The major part of her work is amongst inner-city congregations.

Clara's present priority is amongst people with AIDS. As rejection by family and friends often leads either to homelessness or very substandard living conditions, she is trying to raise funds for some form of residence. Her warm, accepting personality comes into its own in the sensitive ministry of counselling the families of AIDS sufferers and of those with AIDS who have the added isolation of being in prison.

Clara is also involved in the liturgical life of Buffalo Cathedral. For her, the interdependence of worship and service needs continual symbolic expression, both for the education of the church and for the fulfilment of her own calling. An over-emphasis on either liturgy or service within the community she feels misrepresents a full understanding of the ministry and office of deacon.

3. Arlinda Cosby is a deacon in ECUSA. She began her training as a candidate for priesthood but, some way into that course, began to discern that priesthood was actually not the right expression for her spirituality and sense of call in ministry. As her understanding of the diaconate grew, she realized that this was the type of ministry to which she was the more fitted.

Subsequently, Arlinda's work as deacon has developed into a 'bridging ministry,' linking her parish life with a particular concern for the aged in the area of California where she is based. Initially she recognized a need for a more co-ordinated and caring ministry to convalescent and old people's homes in the area. With the support of her own and neighbouring parishes, she set up a committee to raise funds to establish such work. She began her work by developing a programme which aimed at encouraging the involvement of local people, and particularly local Christians, in some form of service to the homes.

From that initial goal of facilitating the ministry of others, Arlinda's own ministry has developed in three main areas. She now trains members of the Episcopal Church in both discerning the need for such a ministry in their own area and in devising appropriate means of service. She holds support groups and training sessions for those volunteers who are most deeply involved in the ministry; and she organizes parish conferences on ageing.

4. Connie Hartquist is a highly trained hospital chaplain and an ordained deacon in ECUSA. She began her present ministry as chaplain of the San Francisco General Hospital in 1985. In a country where most Episcopalians can afford private health care, Connie finds that her work in a public hospital is directed less towards those from her own Church and more towards the poorer people in society. The hospital includes a prison ward and the largest AIDS ward in the world.

Connie's ministry follows a familiar pattern, in that as a deacon she understands her task to be that of facilitating the caring service of others rather than in spending much of her time in personal one-to-one chaplaincy work. She began to explore a more extensive and collaborative pattern of hospital ministry and has been able to develop a successful volunteer programme in a relatively short time. Within the last two years she has trained around thirty volunteers as chaplain's assistants. Each one has undertaken a twelve-week course of two hours per week, led by Connie. On completion of the course, each volunteer works for a few hours each week in the hospital. Having such a number of assistants has meant a far wider ranging service to the hospital than

would have been possible with the limited number of gifts in a personal ministry as chaplain. An example of this can be seen in the AIDS ward. As part of a specially trained and supported group, Connie has been able to place in this ward a volunteer who is skilled in massage. This is a particularly appropriate service in a situation where personal contact and relaxation are much needed.

Deacons in Britain

A. Brother Victor S.S.F. is a permanent deacon in the Church of England. Since 1971 he has worked as a Franciscan originally as a lay brother with ex-offenders in an After-Care Hostel near Manchester, and he was then Guardian in London's East End from 1978 to 1986.

During the eight years in Plaistow, Victor was involved in establishing a Good Neighbour scheme. In practical terms, the scheme sought to help the local community, especially those from the most disadvantaged areas, to develop networks of neighbourly support and mutual care. The tone of the scheme was to affirm the contribution of many local people to their community if they could find sufficient support and encouragement to believe in the value and effectiveness of what they offered.

Clearly in his lay ministry as a Franciscan, Victor was engaged in the diaconal work of the church. In 1981 came a turning point when he attended a conference which considered diaconal ministry in many denominations. Victor came to see diakonia as *the* basis of ministry for all God's people. If this was to be renewed and to have a focus and cohesion throughout the church, he concluded that the ordained diaconate must be restored to being a full and equal order. It was not enough to leave this aspect of ministry and mission to groups such as the Church Army and religious orders such as his own, because the whole people of God must be involved. Brother Victor, therefore, offered himself for selection and training as a deacon, a servant and enabler.

On completion of his training with the Southwark Ordination Course, and after spending five months in the USA studying the training and work of deacons in ECUSA, Victor was ordained in June, 1986. He moved to Stepney to begin work with 'Step by Step'.

'Step by Step' is the Bishop of Stepney's Lay Training prgramme. Victor is one of two full-time staff servicing the scheme, which is otherwise organized and managed by local people and clergy. In *Faith in the City,* 'Step by Step' was commended as a course specifically designed for those who live in Urban Priority Areas. As a deacon engaged in such a vital programme of urban Adult Christian Education, Victor tries to encourage the real participation of Christians in the worshipping, decision-making, educational and pastoral life and ministry of their local church and community. He sees an experience-based course such as this one as providing an affirmative structure within which ordinary people may grow in confidence and discover their own gifts and ministries.

This type of educational experience results in personal growth and transformation which issues, among other things, in true diakonia. Thus, through involvement in 'Step by Step,' one person has been able to take

responsibility for a large part of the chaplaincy work in an east-end hospital. A parish group has developed the involvement of their local church in a nearby old people's home.

B. (The Portsmouth Experience). In 1983 the then Bishop of Portsmouth, Ronald Gordon, set up a diocesan training scheme for men to train for the permanent diaconate. By the beginning of 1987 six men had been ordained deacon and six more were in training. All had been selected by the diocese's own selection conference and all had been, or were in the process of being, trained on the diocesan training programme. This takes the form of a two-year core curriculum in theology and a one-year course in diaconal formation.

One of the features of the training programme has been to 'develop pastoral skills which will take deacons out into the community.' Consequently, the stress on academic skills is given less priority. Closer observation of the individual deacon's ministry, however, shows that much of their work is church centred. There is a limited sense of the deacon's role being a bridging role between church and community and more of an emphasis on the deacon as assistant to the priest.

The style of ministry of most of the Portsmouth deacons is personal rather than enabling. Working with a high view of 'being deacon' most of the deacons see their ministry in terms of what they do rather than in terms of facilitating the ministry of the laity.

It is early days yet, both in the development of the diocesan scheme and in the ministry of the deacons who have come through it. It is no easy task, particularly in non-stipendiary ministry, to develop adequate structures for the training and encouragement of others in diaconal service. We may hope that the dynamics of community involvement and the enabling of diakonia will grow steadily over the next few years.

There follow some sketches of the ministry of three of the Portsmouth trained deacons:

1. Don Varney was ordained to the permanent diaconate in 1986. He had been uncertain whether priesthood was the ministry into which he was being called. The opportunity to explore and begin to develop a ministry as a deacon was offered to him through the Portsmouth scheme. He works now as a non-stipendiary deacon in the St. Mary's, Liss.

The bulk of Don's ministry seems to be worked out within the worshipping, educational and pastoral life of St. Mary's. The main direction of his pastoral and teaching ministry there is towards those who are young in the faith, both young people and new Christians. Don finds that other tasks include general counselling, distributing the sacrament to the sick and helping with baptism and marriage preparation courses. Liturgically, he acts as a deacon at the eucharist, preaching four or five times a year.

Within the wider community of Liss, a large village of around 6,000, Don has links with a Third World group which tries to make world needs known in the community, and with a care group which aids the elderly with their everyday problems.

At present Don is an electrical engineer and sees his role of deacon at work largely in terms of personal example and witness, much the same as any Christian in the work place. He is hoping to become a social worker, working with families with broken relationships. It is possible that he may find a more obvious outlet for his ministry as deacon, both in his own pastoral ministry and in encouraging the care of others for this particular kind of family in the community.

2. Bob Diaper is the manager of an income tax office and deacon at St. Saviour, Stamshaw. As a deacon working full time in secular employment, Bob has growing opportunities for pastoral counselling and generally being alongside his colleagues to listen and support.

Outside his full-time work, Bob has put his professional skills at the practical service of the wider community. Thus he is able to help people understand the complexities of the tax system; he is on the management committee of a local drop-in centre; he is involved in the administration of the Council of Churches. He is also increasingly involved in the accountancy and administrative work of the Society of St. Francis, of which he is a tertiary.

Although Bob has clearly found pastoral and administrative opportunities for diaconal ministry, both at work and in the wider community, the major part of his work as deacon takes place within the internal ministry of St. Saviour's. Indeed he sees the heart of his diaconal ministry focused within the gathered church. He has a weekly preaching ministry, nurtured during his years as a Reader, and serves as a deacon in the liturgy.

3. Roy Overthrow is both deacon and verger at Portsmouth Cathedral. Before training as a deacon, Roy had explored the possibilities of ordination as a priest. Although priesthood was the obvious and, at that time, the only possibility for ordained ministry, he did not think that this role was the right one for him. That sense was confirmed by A.C.C.M. It was not until he was given the opportunity to consider the distinctive diaconate by his own diocese that Roy's sense of call to ordained ministry began to take some shape.

Roy's ministry is centred almost entirely within the Cathedral. He plays an active part in the liturgy, and describes his work with the parish youth group, visitors group and service readers as a 'ministry of encouragement'.

It is as a verger, however, that Roy finds particular expression of his own diakonia. Much of his time is spent in the cleaning and preparation of the Cathedral for worship. He sees his task of creating an environment for prayer, and facilitating a base for the Cathedral clergy to work in, and visitors and parishioners to worship in, as integral to his diakonia.

The diaconal preferential option for the disadvantaged has been nurtured in Roy through many years of teaching in an adult training centre for people with mental handicaps. Now as verger, he finds that many people with problems of mental health or alcoholism come into the Cathedral. Roy is the person who meets and ministers to these people. he describes this aspect of his work in this way 'I don't so much go out to minister to the poor and disadvantaged, rather they come in to me.'

C. Since June, 1986 when the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church (S.E.C.) passed legislation enabling women to be deacons, a few men and all the women technically have formed a permanent diaconate. As in England, the picture is not clear. Many women are waiting in the diaconate for the time when they can test their call to be priests. There is a movement within the Church, however, as in England, to look at the whole question of a permanent distinctive diaconal ministry.

At present an S.E.C. working group has been set up to research the question 'If there are to be permanent deacons, how should we use them?' Their particular concern is to look at the exercise of diakonia 'in the world'. The first meeting of this working group was held in March, 1987, so no report has yet appeared. Despite the lack of clarity over diaconal office and ministry and only a limited number of stipendiary posts, the diaconate is alive and well in Scotland in the shape of the Revd. Stan Letton.

Stan is a non-stipendiary deacon in Brechin, Dundee. He took early retirement with the aim of deepening his commitment to service in the local community. He was already involved in hospital radio and work with the blind when, in 1981, he was approached by his rector with a view to offering himself as a deacon. After some training on the St. John's College Extension course, supplemented by local training, Stan was ordained deacon in September, 1982.

Stan's diaconal ministry is worked out in two main areas. Firstly, he serves as deacon in the worshipping life of his parish church. Secondly, he is committed to enabling the diakonia of others through his work with the blind. He set up a talking newspaper, initially by spending a good deal of time talking to groups in order to promote his vision and encourage participation. he wrote to many charities to raise funds for the work. He is the paper's chief editor. From the start of the project, however, he was involved in training volunteers. He now has around sixty volunteers who work with both the production of the paper and the pastoral care of its recipients. Stan works in close association with the local Blind Society. So successful has the talking newspaper been that he now masterminds five different weekly editions in five different towns.

As well as this enabling aspect of ministry, Stan still sees hospital radio work as part of his own personal ministry as a deacon. He spends about six hours each week preparing a two and a half hour programme of music and chat. He also visits patients in the wards.

Stan's ministry has a more distinctively diaconal flavour than that of some of his English counterparts. His style of ministry and his concern to discover needs and then meet them through encouraging association with interested groups, and by developing a skilled volunteer network, has many similarities with the work of deacons in Canada and America.

It is to be hoped that the S.E.C. perceive the value of such a distinctive ministry in their present research to discover the potential of the diaconate.

7. CONCLUSION

Is the church travelling towards a richer ministry or a greater muddle? In a living Body made up of a variety of people and many strands of history, it would be a mistake to want to have everything too tidy. But we do need to be faithful in searching out the means of responding to God's character and living it out in the world. The diaconate offers such a possibility to the church's structures and people. The difficulty is that renewing the distinctiveness of the diaconate cannot be done in isolation, it has wide-ranging implications.

Renewal of the diaconate will be part of renewing lay ministry. It would mean an increased level of participation in ministry by all members of the Body of Christ. The style of diaconal ministry generally would be to draw out the gifts of fellow Christians, and facilitate their use, particularly in service. It would draw congregations into active involvement and mission in the local community, because part of the role of the deacon would be to establish bridging links between the communities. The church is facing profound challenges in its understanding of its role in the world. The image of the powerful ecclesiastical institution is no longer very helpful. We are, often uncomfortably, having to find ways of using power to serve rather than control. The church is beginning to realize its place beside those who are without power in society in the service of those who are 'at a disadvantage'.[1] This is one of the particular concerns of the diaconate which might then, in living this out, act as a catalyst for the church in the renewal of its mission.

A full and equal order of deacons would inevitably affect the other orders of ministry. It would signal a move away from a hierarchical concept of ministry. Deacons would no longer be seen as the lowest rank of clergy; nor would it be necessary to 'progress' through the different orders, each one subsuming within itself the character of the previous stage. Ordination would be in response to vocation to a distinctive ministry either as deacon or priest. The differentiation between callings would be reflected in selection procedures and training. It might result in freeing many priests from the burden of responsibility for all aspects of the congregation's ministry.

This is not an insular concern; it is a facet of world-wide ecumenical debate. The three-fold order of ministry is held to be a possible bond of unity between different Churches. The renewal of the order of deacon would be a positive and unitive contribution to the whole church.

We have indicated some of the implications of a renewed ministry of the deacon. There are many questions still to be asked before structural and living answers can be found. Renewal of any kind will mean leaving some things behind and discovering some new ones; it will bring both pain and joy to God's people. The only kind of renewal worth having is that inspired by the Spirit who calls us to follow him who is among us as one who serves.

[1] David Sheppard *Bias to the Poor* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), p.225.

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